

HUMANIST THOUGHT AND ACTION

THE
HUMANIST
GROUP

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ONE SHILLING

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THE HUMANIST GROUP

PART ONE

1. WHY A HUMANIST GROUP

Humanism takes the position that man has, in large measure, control over his own life both individually and collectively. The Humanist is concerned with bringing about those conditions which are most conducive to the full expression of human life and potentialities. The Humanist Group has an important part to play in helping to achieve these conditions.

The Humanist Group has a two-fold purpose:

- (1) To promote human happiness and the development and enrichment of the human personality in a spirit of social responsibility. The Group should concern itself with the welfare both of its own members and of the community at large.
- (2) To spread the Humanist view of life, showing those who have little knowledge of Humanism what it means to be a Humanist.

An individual Humanist might be expected to pursue these aims, and while he can to some extent work on his own, his efforts will be more successful if carried out in co-operation with other people. One of the places where such co-operation should be particularly fruitful is the Humanist Group, where individual Humanists may meet for discussion, fellowship and joint action. Groups enable beliefs to be put into practice in a way which is difficult for the individual. Groups being larger and stronger can take action collectively on a scale the individual would find impossible. One of the chief advantages of a Group is that it permits division of labour. The Group will also provide resources of strength for the individual who feels himself to be one of a small minority in society, as is sometimes the case with Humanists.

The main aim of this pamphlet is practical—to be of use to Groups. It also presents an analysis, in Part Two, of the purpose and activities of the Humanist Group in the light of recent studies of group behaviour by social scientists. Such knowledge can indicate the most efficient way of achieving certain ends. The end a Humanist wishes to achieve is as stated, namely, a general acceptance of the Humanist outlook, which is best defined as the desire to promote human happiness by a rational approach to situations and problems. From this acceptance will follow the practical application of Humanist values. One cannot really be said to accept a certain value unless one acts upon it, unless it has some application in social life. The relation between discussion and action will be explored later.

2. WHAT A HUMANIST GROUP DOES

(a) Discussion

In its formative stages the Group will consist of people of similar ideas and outlook, probably meeting just for discussion. The topics dealt with may range from the philosophical basis of Humanism to all the "burning problems of the hour". Such discussions may take place after a talk given by a visiting speaker, but Groups should not rely exclusively on these means. The large public lecture meeting is becoming less common as the media of mass communication enable well-known speakers to reach a wider audience more easily. The discussion group, however, possesses advantages over communication via the mass media. In a small discussion group those present will feel that they can make a significant contribution to the views expressed. Accordingly members of the Group itself should give a talk or read a paper on some particular topic. Discussion can also be based on films, plays or tape-recordings, with one member responsible for opening the discussion on the material under consideration. The Group has a duty to explore and help crystallise the opinions of its members. It is likely that the Group will wish to contact other groups of all kinds, religious, political and social for discussion. One becomes clearer as to the grounds of one's own ideas after such two-sided exchanges of opinion.

The Group will no doubt also discuss personal problems, but usually Groups discuss these in a general way. They will probably be discussed individually over tea or after. The value of Group discussion here is that one learns that others have the same general approach to problems, and often the same problems, as oneself. One can then seek out such people for a more detailed conversation afterwards.

If the Group becomes larger than twenty-five it may need to split into smaller discussion groups. As groups grow, the discussion tends to remain in the hands of a small number. This is bad, for it means that a greater and greater proportion of those present are saying very little.

The Group may meet in a member's house, but meetings in public places such as a Community Centre, Adult Education Centre or Town Hall are to be recommended, as the Group is more likely to bring itself to the attention of the local community in this way. Meetings should commence promptly, or perhaps tea or coffee served first to allow for late-comers. They should also finish promptly and fairly early. It is better to end a meeting while everyone is still feeling interested, than to let it continue until members grow restless and some leave of their own accord. Two hours has been found to be a suitable length of time for a talk, questions and discussion. When there is a visiting speaker there should always be an alternative plan in case he cannot attend.

(b) Action

(1) Propaganda: In order to disseminate as widely as possible the ideas of Humanism, the Group should undertake a programme of meetings, together perhaps with the distribution of literature and

circulars. The meetings should be publicised locally. This will help secure for Humanism the status desired by the Humanist movement, namely that Humanism becomes a generally recognised and understood philosophy of life.

(2) Policy Matters: Particularly on matters of current affairs the Group should, after debating its attitude, submit its views to the relevant bodies. This can be in the form of a short resolution of policy, which has been approved by a majority of members. Unanimity is not necessary, but a majority of at least two-thirds is recommended if the matter is put to a vote. Groups should also write letters to the press, national and local, when matters of concern to Humanists are attracting public attention.

(3) Fellowship: Fellowship is an aspect of all successful Group activities, but some events can be organised with this specifically in mind. The Group can thus sponsor such events as dances, rambles, visits to places of interest, etc.

(4) Social Action: Social action is both a sign of an expanding movement and of value in itself. The present welfare state can only provide the framework for the satisfaction of the individual's needs. Where that need is for human kindness, help and affection there is still plenty of room for the voluntary worker. With increasing size the Group will be able to participate in the several fields of social service. It need not be said that the Group is too small for this, for any move will tend to attract the resources and personnel necessary. If a few members of a small Group make an effort, which may strictly speaking be beyond their means, more will be attracted to the Group, consolidating the effort.

One advantage of a group is to be seen here, since it is more likely to be able to supply e.g. one voluntary worker once a week, than is an isolated individual likely to be available with such regularity. The general need for such work is illustrated in the next section. The pamphlet "A guide to voluntary social service" in this series will also be found useful.

(a) Youth Service: The following is a quotation from the report of the Albemarle Committee, published February 1960, Cmnd.929. The Committee was appointed by the Minister of Education to review the Youth Service. The quotation serves to illustrate the need for voluntary help which exists in the many fields of social service. The need for help is thus officially recognised and gives Humanists an ideal opportunity of giving definite expression to their desire to promote human welfare.

"The greater the contribution that voluntary organisations can make to the needs of the age range for which the Youth Service exists (14-20), the more real the partnership insisted upon by the Act and the early circulars.

"We believe it is essential to develop the voluntary principle at every level of activity. We should like to see a national campaign for more voluntary helpers. We wish to emphasise our hope that voluntary help will be used in all

clubs and centres run by local education authorities. The voluntary principle is not weakened by the payment of out-of-pocket expenses.

"We have stressed the need for many more voluntary helpers. We hope that all societies which take an interest in public affairs will find an opportunity to bring this requirement before their members; and that through the press, radio and television ordinary citizens will be made aware of the help they could give. We hope an appeal will be made to professional men and women, technicians, workers and gifted amateurs in sport, music, the arts and so forth, to help and advise groups; to those with a gift for gaining the confidence of young people, to act as leaders; and to those who doubt their aptitudes for youth leadership, to give leaders that invaluable assistance without which they cannot do their work, for example, in canteen work, book-keeping, money-raising, caretaking and secretarial business. The help of the ordinary citizen is the most needed, and particularly during the next ten years of development when there is bound to be a shortage of trained leaders. Let no-one be held back by doubts of his ability or skill; a basic kindness, a simple common sense and unlimited patience are the most important qualities."

The Humanist Group can contact the Area Youth Officer or the Local Education Authority and ask what help is required. After such experience Humanist Groups may start clubs of their own in hired rooms, with grant-aid from the Ministry or L.E.A. The exact amount of grant-aid is under review and up-to-date information should be sought from the local council.

Assistance in the Youth Service is something Humanist Group members can do and adolescents will appreciate the realistic and sympathetic approach of a Humanist to their problems.

(b) Survey Work: The Group may conduct its own survey to detect local needs. Further information is given in the pamphlet "How to make a local social survey", in this series. Part of the purpose of a local survey is to make the Group aware of other groups in the neighbourhood with similar interests.

(5) Co-operation: Co-operation with other organisations for social, educational and political purposes will take place if such action is agreed to by the Group. Affiliation by the national body commits the Humanist movement to the carrying out of certain jobs for them when needed. Headquarters will supply information and requests to Groups when such matters arise, e.g. support for local branches of U.N.A., N.C.C.L., or the writing of letters to M.P.s as opportunities for law reform arise.

(6) Cultural Activities: The Group may sponsor cultural pursuits, at least in the sense that if some of its members want to try to share their own enthusiasms or interests they are encouraged to do so. Humanism stands for the enjoyment and cultivation of interests.

(7) A Permanent Base: The aim should be for the Group to acquire its own premises. At this stage the Group will be quite large and will have a number of sub-sections for the various activities. It will become a real force in the local community. Use can be made of schemes of grant-aid or rating relief for activities of benefit to society.

3. HOW TO RUN A GROUP

Initially the Group may be run by one person and such individuals do a good job in getting the Group going. The one-man-led Group probably admits of a more flexible programme. But since the Group's continued existence will depend on the efforts of this one member, a transition to a committee-run Group is desirable. With the collective responsibility of a committee, the Group is less likely to fail. It also permits a larger number of people to play an active part in the affairs of the Group. A constitution with division of labour is advisable, though if the constitution is too rigid it may collapse in a crisis, when everyone says "It wasn't my job". Discussion and business meetings should be held regularly. For business meetings it is essential that an agenda be prepared and circulated to members. Meetings for other purposes can be held as the circumstances require.

OFFICERS: The first important officer will probably be designated Secretary, and initially most of the running of the Group will be in his hands. As soon as possible an effort should also be made to secure a suitable Chairman. A Treasurer will soon need to be appointed if the Group is to pay for hire of rooms, speakers, etc., and a subscription by members decided upon. The duties of officers will be along these lines:

(1) **Chairman:** Takes the chair at meetings—strong chairmanship is often needed at discussion meetings. The Chairman will exercise general responsibility and will be the final authority in the affairs of the Group. He may delegate jobs to individual members as and when the need arises. As the Chairman himself may at times be unable to discharge his responsibilities, it is a sound scheme to have a Deputy Chairman who can take over when the Chairman is indisposed. An ad hoc Chairman can of course be appointed for particular meetings.

(2) **Secretary:** Arranges the programme. He will be responsible for the publicity of meetings in the local press, to which both announcements and reports of meetings should be sent. He will also deal with the circulation of such information to members, the submission of reports to H.Q., and all correspondence. If there is no civic notice board for the announcement of meetings of local societies the Group might take the initiative in bringing together representatives to press the Council for the provision of one. The secretary should keep a record book for the sake of continuity and for the benefit of future officers. The record book will serve as a basis for an annual review of activities and as an aid in programme planning.

(3) Treasurer: Collects subscriptions and pays for hire of meeting rooms and speakers' expenses. There is no doubt that an adequate financial basis is essential for the stability and success of any movement. Individual members must be prepared to contribute if they feel that the development of the Humanist movement is worthwhile. Adequate funds should be raised to finance local activities and to contribute to the effectiveness of the national Humanist movement.

The constitution may contain provision for election or rotation of officers or review by general consent. A good system is to mix sexes and ages on the committee, especially when it is growing, in order to make it more representative. With an expanding Group more officers may be needed, for example, a publicity secretary, a social activity organiser and a social service job secretary.

4. ROLE OF CENTRAL ORGANISATION

The central organisation will attempt to secure for Humanist views representation at a national level, that is, it will act as a national lobby.

In matters that require a change in the law, it will usually work with and through special associations, e.g. The Howard League, The Abortion Law Reform Association. The following is a list of organisations with which the Ethical Union is currently associated for special purposes: The United Nations Association, The National Peace Council, The Howard League for Penal Reform, The National Council for Civil Liberties, The Joint Council for the Development of General Education, The International League for the Rights of Man, The Abortion Law Reform Association, The Movement for Colonial Freedom, The League Against Cruel Sports.

The Ethical Union is directly associated with the Rationalist Press Association and the National Secular Society in the Humanist Council, which is constituted of representatives of the three bodies. The Humanist Council is responsible for the public relations of the movement as a whole in this country. It meets at least quarterly to review matters of common interest and to initiate common action.

The relationship between these bodies is however under constant consideration, and changes may occur in the interests of greater effectiveness.

The Humanist Council is represented on the Humanist Broadcasting Council which has been recognised by the B.B.C. and I.T.A. and which exists to press for recognition of Humanist views in broadcasting programmes.

The Ethical Union is a founder member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union which unites Humanist movements throughout the world and seeks to promote them in countries where there are none. I.H.E.U. has consultative status with U.N.E.S.C.O.

The central body, governed by a Council on which all affiliated Groups have the right of representation, promotes structural liaison within the movement by these means:

- (1) Circulating information about speakers and activities.

- (2) Circulating problems and topics for discussion, in order to get the 'mind' of the movement on particular issues.
- (3) Sponsoring conferences and working-parties.
- (4) Putting people in touch with one another and with Groups and encouraging the visiting of one Group by another, in order help to personalise the organisation and to build it on friendship.
- (5) Assistance with the conduct of funerals, marriages and other ceremonies.
- (6) The publication of journals and pamphlets of interest and use to Humanists.

PART TWO

5. PSYCHOLOGY OF GROUPS

The psychologist is interested in understanding why a person joins any social group, and tends to explain group behaviour in terms of the satisfactions which thereby accrue to the individual member. We know that groups develop shared standards of behaviour or "norms". By conforming to group norms the individual achieves certain ends. He helps achieve the end or avowed purpose of the group, which he sympathises with, but could not achieve by himself. He also satisfies what is referred to by psychologists as his need for acceptance by groups. This is the psychological manifestation of the "social instinct". The sense of belonging or feeling of acceptance is more likely to occur in groups where members have aims and opinions in common. It is a rewarding experience to find that others share our opinions.

Thus some individuals will join Humanist Groups because they think their own beliefs are similar to the beliefs or "norms" of the Group. The effectiveness of groups consisting of like-minded individuals tends, however, to decline with the passage of time. Probably as a result of this social support for his beliefs any doubts the individual may have disappear and he needs the reassurance of others less. A further reason for decline with age is that the members of the group come to know all the ideas and opinions of the other members. They then feel a need for fresh acquaintances outside the group. In this case the individual may leave the group to satisfy those social needs elsewhere, or he may urge the group to attract a wider variety of members.

However, it is hoped that primarily the member will hold the beliefs and attitudes of the Humanist Group (what Homans calls the 'external system' of the group) to be true and valuable and urge expansion to secure their acceptance by a wider society. Motives are

probably mixed, but in any case the group will try to attract the interested outsider. Such people on the fringe of the group who are interested and wanting to learn may join the group and take over its beliefs if they derive certain satisfactions from their contact with the group. Festinger believes that norms are taken over or 'internalised' to the extent that there are positive attractions within the group. Threats or restraints may produce public compliance but not private acceptance. Such dependence on the group for the satisfaction of psychological needs leads to the development of a kind of conscience, with definite guilt feelings on the part of the individual when he transgresses the norms of the group in private. It is usually the slight feeling of guilt, namely anxiety, which prevents the individual from transgressing the norms in private when he contemplates or is tempted to do so.

It is a fact that some people are motivated to join groups by a desire to secure some position of authority or control over others in the group. Such people represent a possible threat to the group, but we should aim to use their energies constructively. The psychologist Sprott says:

"One may say that on the whole people do not like being ordered about. On the other hand the leader may give orders for action which are so clearly in accord with the achievement of the goals which the followers have at heart that the satisfaction of approaching the goal outweighs the dissatisfaction of being controlled. From this it would appear to follow that in order to mitigate the almost inevitable resentment at being ordered about, some technique is required to align the interests of those who have to obey with those who give the orders."

Such a technique has been called "participatory leadership".

These ideas can explain the fact that, while certain individuals are motivated by a desire to lead, others appear to derive satisfaction from being led, in the sense that they like arrangements to be made for them. They are reluctant to organise events for themselves, but are happy to go along with arrangements that have been "laid on" for them. They do so because, as Sprott indicates, they thereby achieve other ends which they value, such as social contact or the hearing of a certain speaker. The leader should thus try to avoid irritating breakdowns in the efficiency of his administration. The person who likes arrangements to be made for him will not feel inclined to remedy the omission himself. He may not even complain at the time but he is less likely to attend future events if he thinks they will be mismanaged.

A participatory style of leadership has at least two basic elements. The subordinate is given a considerable amount of influence on decisions that are made. At the same time the chief plays an active rather than a passive role—discussing, suggesting leads, raising questions. Research on styles of leadership in industrial working situations suggests that neither a predominantly directive (autocratic) nor a predominantly permissive (laissez-faire) style of leadership ordinarily works well and that a participatory style contributes best to morale.

Lippitt and White found the same with boys' model-making clubs. Boys led in a democratic or participatory fashion enjoyed most their group activity and were practically as high on production as the autocratic group (whose productivity dropped whenever the leader wasn't looking). Studies in an industrial setting find that employee-centred as opposed to production-centred supervision is generally related to high output.

Which individual fulfils the role of leader appears to depend partly on the group situation—whichever activity the group engages in tending to produce its own leader. Yet also there appear to be individuals who issue orders in groups more than others. Such 'born leaders' may however be rejected if they do not align themselves with the wishes of the majority of the group or do not consider their feelings.

In the formation of norms, however, it is probably the case that the leader can crystallise the rather ill-defined wishes of the members of his group, perhaps bringing them a little nearer his own. Once established, the norms of a group are often safeguarded by a process known as 'rejection of deviates'. If a newcomer refuses to conform to the group's demands, pressure is put on him to leave. For the Humanist Group this is not to be recommended, as a spirit of tolerance should prevail. However, in other less tolerant groups expulsion of those who do not "toe the line" does take place. Humanist Groups should certainly not allow deliberate obstructionism or selfish monopolisation of discussion.

We can thus attribute the development of norms to at least three mechanisms:

- (1) Individuals joining groups holding beliefs similar to their own;
- (2) Beliefs of a loosely linked group converging over time;
- (3) Rejection of deviates.

It may be felt that this psychological approach neglects the truth or falsity of beliefs. If we hold that the beliefs of Humanism are 'true', we may say that clear-sighted people join Humanist Groups because they recognise this to be so. However, it is manifestly the case that other, non-rational, factors also operate in determining whether an individual joins a particular group. Furthermore, it may be argued that Humanism consists of a very minimum of beliefs which may be described as true or false, its primary nature being that of a value-system comprising attitudes and opinions, in which case psychological factors are certainly more important.

Besides those who join the Group because it attracts them in various ways are those who benefit by it and are influenced by the Group's activities—they may come to accept the Group as an established and worthwhile institution while not being sufficiently motivated to join it themselves.

6. ENSURING SUCCESS

It is helpful here to mention the techniques of group therapy, widely used today. When properly used such discussions should be

guided by a psychiatrist or psychologist experienced in such work. Yet Humanist Groups can use with advantage the talking out of the relationships within a group. This leads to a greater understanding of the forces at work and often helps reduce domination and conflict.

Essentially this type of group discussion provides training in social perception. One comes to a better understanding of other people's feelings, motives and wishes, and learns the cues by means of which they may be recognised. Use can also be made of role-playing or psycho-drama. Role-playing consists of the acting of short sketches, either scripted or unscripted, depicting typical situations in which members of the Group may find themselves. For example, a leader trying to get an unwilling member of the Group to undertake some activity, or a member having to explain or defend Humanism to a hostile outsider. Such techniques have been found most useful in providing insights into the difficulties involved, and in seeing the other's point of view.

It has been found that deep-seated differences can often be resolved if the opponents can be induced to co-operate on some activity not related to their disagreements. While differences of opinion should be explored, there comes a time at which they should be put on one side, and effort turned to less controversial matters.

Fundamentally, to avoid failure or break-up the Group must make itself more attractive in the ways indicated, so that people find it a rewarding experience to belong to the Group. In summary the Group should:

- (1) provide opportunities for leadership and achievement for those who find fulfilment in this way;
- (2) provide opportunities for social contact for those who wish to meet others and make friends;
- (3) undertake propaganda and action for those who feel that the 'external system' or avowed purpose is the most important aspect of the Group.

Failure, of course, may not be due to any internal strain but to lack of publicity and effort to attract new members. The distribution of literature, handouts etc., in the neighbourhood is again recommended, together with advertisements in the local press and door-to-door canvassing.

The Group should attempt to bring itself to the notice of the local community. A valuable way of doing this is by the sponsoring of other activities besides discussion meetings, e.g. organising rambles, dances or other social activities. Those who enquire about the Group should readily be given more information. Strangers to meetings should always be welcomed and encouraged to come again.

It should not be assumed, however, that if a Group goes out of existence this is necessarily a sign of failure. It may indicate that the Group has served a temporary purpose and has achieved its ends. This is especially the case with sub-groups propagated by a parent Group.

Finally, the advice and help of the Ethical Union's Group Organisers should be borne in mind. They are available with general assistance and can put people in touch with others interested or with relevant organisations and authorities.

7. EFFECTS OF GROUP ACTIVITIES

There can be no doubt that any particular group in society creates a certain impression in the minds of the general public. It simplifies matters for the individual to be able to think of all the members of a group as possessing certain qualities. It helps him to find his way through a complicated environment by imposing a certain order on his perceptions. The result of this process is that any significant group in society has its public 'image'. Humanist Groups will have one—this is inescapable. It is probably the case today that there are people who have not come across Humanism or a Humanist Group at all and so for them there is no image. For others the image may be favourable or unfavourable.

Groups should be aware that their activities will help to promote or create an image of the 'Humanist', and it is part of the job of the Humanist movement to decide what this image should be. A brief definition of Humanism has already been given. To this can be added the belief of the Humanist in the brotherhood of man. It is suggested that the image of the Humanist might comprise three aspects:

- (1) Commonsense approach;
- (2) Characterised by warmth and friendliness;
- (3) Willing to take action where necessary.

It should be realised that the aim is a classless image, one not particularly associated with any small section of the community, showing acceptance of the brotherhood of man. Such an image will be promoted by what the Group does, and so the wider the range of its activities the more universal will be its image. Even the place of meeting creates a certain impression of the nature of the members of the Group. Meeting in a hotel room, a private house, or a hall creates different impressions. In order to create as inclusive an image as possible the place of meeting should be varied. This will of course be achieved if the Group has reached the stage of having several sub-sections. If Groups or individuals engage in useful activities, declaring at the same time that they are doing it as Humanists, such image-promotion will be accelerated.

The decision of an organisation to promote a certain image tends to be self-validating. People who identify themselves with the image will join and those who feel themselves to be untypical may feel alienated and leave. Perhaps an equally important aspect utilised by advertisers, both for commercial goods and for political parties, is the

fact that people will identify themselves with an image which represents how they would like to be or feel they ought to be. Images appeal to people's aspirations. As a result of joining groups attractive in this way, the individual may become what earlier he only wished he was. Therefore the image of the Humanist must at least be attractive, and Groups should avoid activities which will give them a bad name or adverse publicity, unless a matter of principle is involved.

The consideration of the psychological and social impact of Groups will no doubt provide interesting discussion topics. It is hoped that such an occasional objective consideration of the nature and effect of Group activities will help us build a strong Humanist movement.

References

Much of the research on group behaviour is discussed in M. Argyle's book *The Scientific Study of Social Behaviour*, Methuen (25/-). A good account of the work of psychologists mentioned in this pamphlet is given and the attempt made to put such work in theoretical settings.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS OF THE ETHICAL UNION

Humanist Thought and Action

Humanism Explained, by Hector Hawton	8d.
Humanist Parents and Teachers, by Virginia Flemming	8d.
A Guide to Voluntary Social Service, by Richard Clements and Others	8d.
The Humanist Himself, by H. J. Blackham	1s. 2d.
The Humanist Group, by A. F. M. Brierley	1s. 2d.
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